

# How the church is combatting sexual abuse: an interview with Jesuit Hans Zollner

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Jesuit Father Hans Zollner, president of the Center for Child Protection at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, speaks at a news conference officially launching the center Feb. 16, 2015 (CNS photo/Paul Haring).

“The impression that Pope Francis is not hard enough on perpetrators is wrong. The general line of judgment and sentence has not changed,” Hans Zollner, S.J., president of the Centre for Child Protection at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, told **America** in this interview in which he explains what the pope and the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (PCPM) are doing to combat child abuse and ensure the protection of children in church institutions worldwide.

There has been much discussion about the need to hold bishops accountable. The PCPM recommended the establishment of a special tribunal to deal with negligence, and gained the pope’s approval. The Vatican announced in June 2015 that this tribunal would be established, but this never happened. Father Zollner explains why.

Pope Francis established the PCPM on March 22, 2014, and appointed Father Zollner as one of its founding members together with Marie Collins—the Irish survivor whose recent resignation from it sent shock waves through the church. In this interview, the German Jesuit not only explains the work the commission is doing to train Vatican officials and bishops’ conferences worldwide about safeguarding children; he also comments on Marie Collins’s resignation.

The following is a slightly edited version of the interview:

***Some have alleged that Pope Francis talks a lot about combatting child abuse in the church but is soft on perpetrators. What do you say to such charges?***

First of all, the impression that he is not hard enough on perpetrators is wrong. The general line of judgment and sentence has not changed. He has introduced some measures so that even in cases of appeal the decision is reached faster; survivor-victims and the accused know earlier what is the final decision. Contrary to public opinion, the motu proprio “Like a Loving Mother” (June 4, 2016) has an effect, because it clarifies and strengthens procedures that were already there to be fulfilled if needed.

Moreover, I know that since then allegations against bishops regarding accountability have come from various parts of the world, though this is not publicly known. First, because we don’t have here a board where it is written that this allegation has come in and, also, because the Anglophone Western world is interested basically in their own countries, and they don’t look beyond that to Latin America, Asia or Africa, where we have had bishops and provincials having had to resign.

***Why doesn’t the Vatican make this known?***

I think this is because the understanding here is still that you do not talk about cases with names and circumstances in order, first-of-all, to allow for due process and, secondly, following the general principles of guaranteeing the rights of the person. You must realize that when an allegation comes in, either of having abused a minor or of protecting an abuser, if your name is then put out there (in public), that means the end of your career even before there is any judicial sentence and irrespective of whether or not you are guilty. Apart from that, one of the guiding principles of canon law is that you protect the good names of all involved.

I am not a canon lawyer, but I think that we need to look at the procedures and processes. We need to look into how letters from survivors-victims or allegations are received and acknowledged. I believe this is being considered and, I think, change is on the way. The motu proprio is not what the commission had recommended to the pope but it was erroneously communicated to the press as the creation of a new tribunal.

***But the Vatican, the pope said this.***

He spoke about it, but whether he used the term for the first time or whether other people had spoken to him about a tribunal, I don’t know. In any case the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has the capacities to be such a tribunal. So, what was needed was guidelines about what the process should be, how it is put in place, and how it is to be followed through. This is the intention of the motu proprio, “Like a Loving Mother,” that gives the four congregations involved—for Bishops, for the Evangelization of Peoples, for Religious, for the Oriental Churches—the task to flesh out how they are to deal with allegations that come in from their area of competence.

Many people don’t know that the church is not a monolithic bloc; they think the Vatican has only one ministry that deals with ordinaries, that is with bishops and provincials. We have, in fact, three congregations that deal with bishops, and one that deals with religious. These four congregations have to flesh out their own procedures and then if there is an allegation against a bishop (or provincial), the appropriate congregation must carry out an investigation of the allegation and if, as a result of this, it decides that the bishop should be removed it must send this recommendation to the pope who, according to the motu proprio, then consults “a college of legal experts” before taking the final decision.

***Besides pushing for the accountability for bishops, what else has the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors achieved?***

Another recommendation from the commission, approved by the pope, is the Day of Prayer [for the victims of

abuse]. On March 3, there was a Day of Prayer in Ireland and in Poland, traditionally among the most Catholic countries in Europe. Prayer is vital in our faith, and that's why it is central to let the reality of deeply wounded people (wounded by representatives of the church) and all that relates to this, such as suffering, passion, rage, depression and death, enter into prayer. Once this is acknowledged in our dialogue with God it leads to changes at the spiritual and theological level, regarding the spiritual trauma and the theological questions behind that. Unfortunately, the church does not often recognize that it is necessary to reach this depth.



Father Hans Zollner greets Andrew Collins, David Ridsdale and Peter Blenkiron at the Pontifical Gregorian University, March 3, 2016. The three men said they were child sex abuse victims in Australia.

There's another positive achievement that's worth highlighting: the commission has been invited by Vatican dicasteries to teach and inform all their members, from the cardinal to the "minutante" [person responsible for drafting the minutes], regarding child protection. This has already happened in three dicasteries, and we are scheduled to work with another two later this year. Then, last September, we were invited for the first time to participate in the annual Vatican course for new bishops; altogether some 250 bishops from all over the world attended.

Furthermore, we PCPM members are being invited to bishops' conferences across the globe, and many of them are seriously committed to doing something about this whole question. I have personally visited more than 40 countries on five continents in order to build awareness and promote safeguarding measures. Other PCPM members have been invited to many more countries.

On March 23, the commission's work group on schools will hold a study day at the Gregorian University to look at Latin America, where the Catholic Church has thousands of schools, all of which must take responsibility for the protection of minors. The Congregation for Catholic Education is much interested in this project and will be present.

The Congregation for Clergy has also taken a big interest in this whole question. I was invited to the consultation

process for preparing the new program for seminary formation. In number 202 of the new guidelines for formation in the seminaries (Ratio Fundamentalis), it is stated that in all seminaries of the Latin Rite seminarians and young priests need to be formed and trained in safeguarding.

***Is the same true for those in religious life?***

This text refers to diocesan seminaries, but, of course, it will impact on the formation of religious too. Thus, for example, the formation programs of the Benedictines, the Dominicans and the Salesians need to be revised as a follow up to this new document.

***What more do you think the pope can do in this field?***

I think he can't do much more in pointing out the gravity of the crime and the sin that is implied in this. He has used the strongest words you can use in Catholic theology.

***Like comparing the abuse of a child by a priest to a black Mass?***

Yes, and he has likened the abuse of the body of a child by sexual abuse to the abuse of the eucharist—a sacrilege. He has also used very strong words in the preface to the recent book by Daniel Pittet, a Frenchman who was abused as a child by a Capuchin priest. These are not only words; he knows the depth of suffering and loneliness.

What more could he do? He could give more staff to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and help to revise the procedures so that as much transparency and speediness is guaranteed in the process. The American bishops, for example, send every case to the CDF, even if in the States the civil cases can't go on because of the statute of limitation in the civil legislation.

***I understand there are perhaps as many as 2,000 cases of alleged abuse of minors by priests yet to be dealt with or concluded in a definitive way (either at the CDF or diocesan level). Is there enough staff at the CDF to deal with these cases?***

No. I think the CDF now has twelve persons who deal with 400-500 allegations per year, and they must read each case, get clarification where necessary and then write on it [making a recommendation]. This lack of personnel is not due to the bad will of the CDF or of the pope. One reason for the limited number of personnel is the fact that there are very few trained penal canon lawyers. Recently more are being trained in this area, but the CDF doesn't yet have enough trained personnel to deal with all the cases. We see this lack of trained personnel in other places too. In the Philippine Bishops Conference, for example, there are very few persons with a doctorate or licentiate in canon law. There are bishops, who are responsible for hundred islands, who don't have even one canon lawyer.

***There is good reason then for Marie Collins's frustration.***

I understand Marie. I understand that she could not stand the slow pace and the resistance, as she perceived it. From my point of view, compared to the normal pace of change in the church, we have made progress in a relatively short time, but compared to some expectations it is not enough. People expect Francis to go faster, and many can't stand it anymore when they hear over and over again that there are still bishops who don't act swiftly and consistently, or where there are still horrible cases of abuse that come to light. Yet, as I see in my encounters in many countries around the globe, much has completely changed for the better compared to five years ago when we had the first symposium here (at the Gregorian). You can talk about this subject publicly now in places like Malaysia, Malawi, Mexico or Slovakia and Poland.

I fully agree that we should invest much more in intervention and prevention of abuse; we should have much more resources, more personnel, although we need to realize that there will never be complete safety: to expect that would be a dangerous illusion. No matter what happens there will always be isolated cases of abuse and leaders who do not deal with it correctly. What we must do is ensure that these cases are few and far between, and when

they happen then they are dealt with, swiftly and justly.

People also need to realize, as Marie said in one interview, that the pope is not the CEO of a global enterprise called the Catholic Church. He cannot simply do what he wants. And even if he decides on things, this does not mean that bishops or provincials follow immediately and wholeheartedly. What we are about, and what I understand the commission is about, is a change of culture, from bottom up. I see this happening in many places. I see it happening here in the Gregorian University, where this semester we have 24 students from 18 countries in the diploma course on safeguarding. These are excellent people, who were sent by their bishops or by their congregations. The U.S. bishops' conference has sent one lay person for his formation. This is the second year we have the diploma course, and from next year on we will have a multidisciplinary master's degree in safeguarding. We see the need to have real experts. We have 8 doctoral students now. You may say that's few, but they are the first of their kind who will go back to Western countries, to India, to African and Latin American countries. We need to go on with this. Change is taking place, but we won't see it as rapid and as thorough as all of us would like to see it.

***You've spoken to the pope; are you convinced, as Marie says, that "he gets it"?***

Yes, he gets it. He gets the depth of the pain, the suffering, the anger, the loneliness and so on. One example: Federico Lombardi, S.J., and I met the pope on Dec. 16, 2016, and we spoke about the congress that we are going to have here in the Gregorian next October about "child dignity in the digital world." We just introduced a few things about sex abuse on the internet and how governments don't know where to go with this. The pope was immediately moved and concerned about all this, and he said straightaway "of course I will support you!" And, I can tell you too that all the dicasteries actively support us in this project.

***Last question: What were your feelings when you learned of Marie's resignation?***

I was very sad. I was really shocked also because I thought that we have come a long way together over five years. It was more than five years since we invited Marie for the symposium at the Gregorian attended by bishops from all over the world. Then, we were founding members of the commission set up by the pope in 2014, and since then we had gone through many discussions, many frustration and made some progress. I tried to ask her calmly what we can do so that we can still complete the (three-year) term (of membership of the PCPM), but she expressed clearly that she could not go on anymore.



Marie Collins (CNS photo/Carol Glatz)

At the same time, a few weeks ago, she allowed us to do the video for the Centre for Child Protection on her own experience. It's a wonderful video which will serve as the introduction to our e-learning program for all our e-learning students in 25 countries who learn about safeguarding. This will be the start of that program because we believe it should follow a "victims first" approach. She will be the first to talk, as she was the first to talk here at the symposium at the Gregorian in 2012. She agreed that we do the shoot. She also agreed that, even after her resignation, she would continue to work in training sessions that we have scheduled with dicasteries of the Roman Curia.

So, I fully respect her. I think I can understand her point of view. I regret it deeply, and yet I believe it could become a blessing in disguise because it brought a lot of shock not only to many who put their trust in the commission because of her presence on it, but also to the curia itself. It may help speed up developments that are on the way, it may sharpen sensitivity, and it might tighten the grip on certain issues that we have been dealing with, such as transparency and what we mean by "zero tolerance," and all that Pope Francis has spelt out in his letter to bishops on Dec 28, 2016.

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